



AS THEY SAW INDIA

K. C. KHANNA



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K. C. KHANNA

Illustrator

KRISHEN KHANNA



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MEGASTHENES AND INDIA

What do other people think of us?

This question is always intriguing. So we read with avid absorption the accounts of people who came to our country many thousands of years ago and compare them with what people say about us today. These travellers' tales are also of interest for another reason. They are the most descriptive source for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history. With accounts of the splendour of the royal court, descriptions of religious ceremonies and details of petty conspiracies, we are transported into an alien world of gracious living, dancing girls, pomp, ruthless murders and rough justice. Often they also provide indirect evidence of the economic, political and social conditions of their time.

This book deals with four travellers who came to India at different times. The circumstances and reasons for their visit greatly influenced their writing and must be taken into consideration as they coloured many of their opinions. Thus, Megasthenes and Alberuni, both scholars and courtiers, emphasized social and economic conditions, while

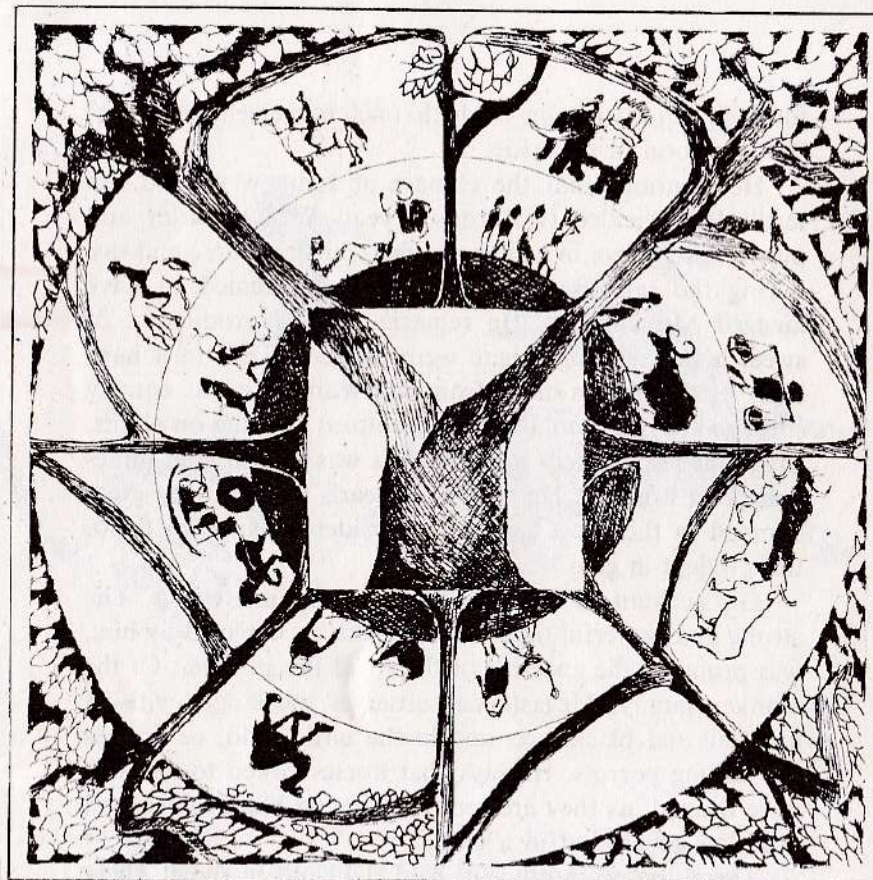
Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang, both Chinese monks, concentrated on religious matters.

The first important traveller to India was Megasthenes. He lived here for a number of years and wrote a great deal about our country and people in his book *Indika*. This work now exists only in quotations in the works of later writers. The fragments do not add up to a complete view of the times, but a picture can be reconstructed which is more or less accurate.

What brought Megasthenes to India?

About 2,400 years ago, Seleucus Nicator, a general of Alexander the Great, tried to recapture the territories once held by his master but subsequently conquered by Chandragupta Maurya. Chandragupta defeated him in 305 B.C. and peace was concluded by a matrimonial alliance. Seleucus then sent Megasthenes as his ambassador to the court of Chandragupta.

Megasthenes resided at the Mauryan court at Pataliputra (near modern Patna) and also travelled around the country. His description of the shape and size of India is more or less accurate. He observed our two largest rivers, the Ganga and the Sindhu. Both these rivers and many of their tributaries were navigable, except during the rainy season when they were in flood. It appears that the waterways were used a good deal more than they are today. Roads were also used and the best known of these was the road from the north-west to Pataliputra. This road with its shady trees, signposts, rest-houses and wells may be considered the forerunner of the present Grand Trunk Road.



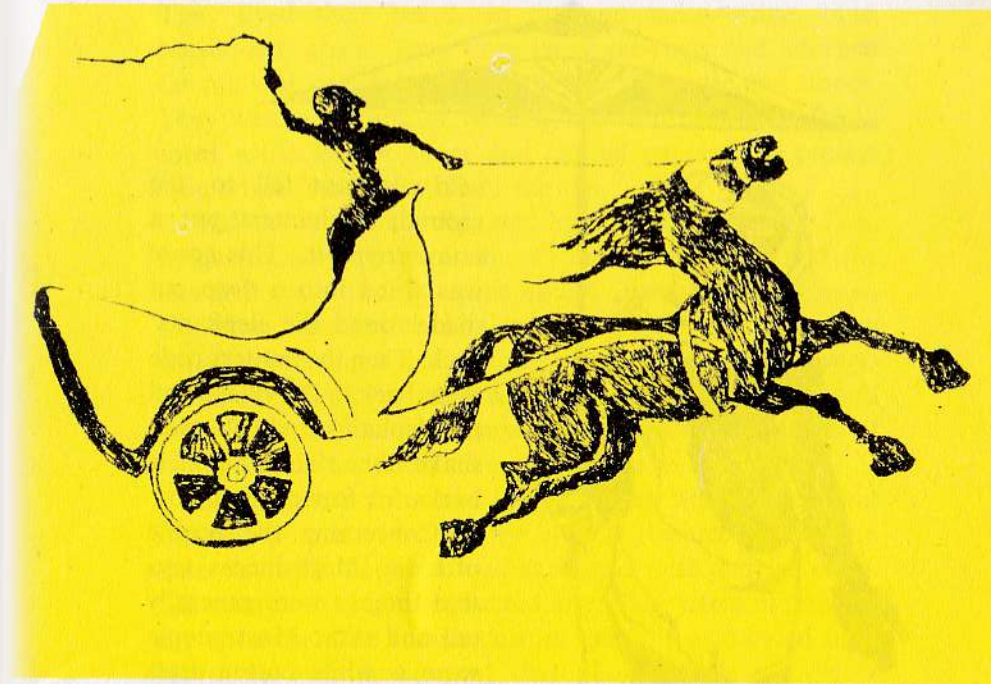
The numerous trees that grew in India also attracted his attention. He was specially fascinated by the great banyan tree, the branches of which grew downwards and took root. Megasthenes says that these trees were so huge that the trunk of some of them could not even be embraced by five men. He describes one particular banyan tree which

formed such a vast sun-shade that 400 horsemen could pass the afternoon in its shade.

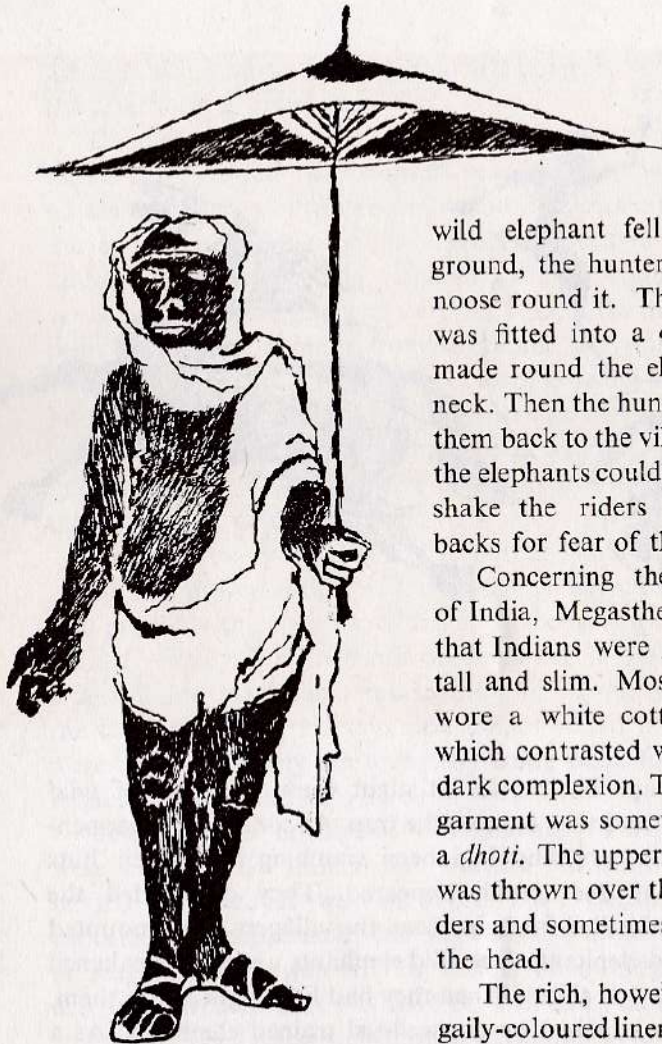
He mentions that the climate of India was good. Its fertile land yielded two crops a year. Wheat, barley and pulses were grown in winter and flax, millet, sesame and rice during the rainy season. Two products seemed to have amazed Megasthenes. He remarks on the production of sweet honey although there were no bees. This must have been 'gur' which is made from sugarcane. He was equally surprised to find wool (obviously cotton) growing on plants. Megasthenes also tells us that India was rich in gold mines and pearl fisheries. He adds that pearls were in very great demand in the West and were considered as worth thrice their weight in gold.

His account of animal life is equally interesting. The strong and powerful tiger of East India, as depicted by him, was probably the ancestor of the royal Bengal tiger. Of the monkey family, Megasthenes observes the langur with its long tail and black face, and in the bird world, he notices the talking parrots. He says that horses yoked to chariots were trained, as they are today, by being blind folded and made to go around in a circle.

There was no shortage of wild elephants in India. These were caught and trained for warfare. Megasthenes has related the peculiar way in which these elephants were captured. A deep trench was dug round a large, flat area. A single passage was left by means of a bridge thrown across the trench. This was covered with earth and straw to conceal it. Then a few well-trained elephants were stationed



in the trap. Their cries at night drew the herd of wild elephants and they entered the trap. As soon as this happened, the hunters who had been watching from their huts built along the trench appeared. They dismantled the bridge and called for help. Then the villagers came mounted on trained elephants. The wild elephants were first weakened by hunger and thirst. When they had little fight left in them, they were attacked by the well-fed trained elephants. As a



wild elephant fell to the ground, the hunters put a noose round it. This noose was fitted into a deep cut made round the elephants' neck. Then the hunters rode them back to the village and the elephants could not even shake the riders off their backs for fear of the pain.

Concerning the people of India, Megasthenes says that Indians were generally tall and slim. Most people wore a white cotton dress which contrasted with their dark complexion. The under garment was somewhat like a *dhoti*. The upper covering was thrown over the shoulders and sometimes covered the head.

The rich, however, wore gaily-coloured linen clothes.

They dyed their beards in different hues—white, blue, purple and green. They wore ivory ear-rings and adorned themselves with gold ornaments set with precious stones. They were also fond of wearing flowers. They used thick-soled white leather shoes and carried parasols to protect themselves from the glare of the sun.

Indians were usually healthy and lived long. This, Megasthenes insists, was due to their simple diet and the fact that they drank no wine except during sacrifices when rice-wine was served. If they were ill or worried, they consulted the *yogis* and Brahmin philosophers. These *yogis* or *vanaprasthis* lived in forests, wore the bark of trees and ate wild fruit. Medicines prescribed were usually roots of plants or flowers and all kinds of physical exercises.

Megasthenes states that Indian women were virtuous but inclined to marry for money even if the man had more than one wife. They matured early and were married early. Girls were not taught the sacred lore. The system of dowries did not exist. One Indian custom specially astounded him. He notes with amazement that poor parents who were unable to marry off their daughters exposed them for sale in the market-place.

The caste system obviously perplexed Megasthenes. He mentions that the people were divided into seven classes according to their occupations—philosophers, peasants, herdsmen, craftsmen and traders, soldiers, overseers or spies and councillors or assessors. He adds that “no one is allowed to marry out of his own caste, or to exchange one profession or trade for another or

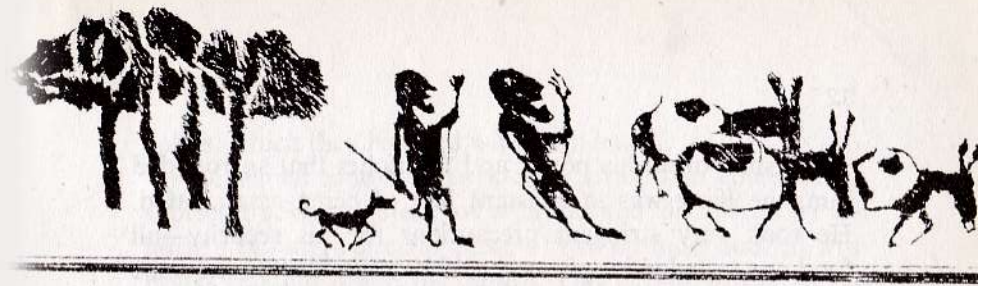
to follow more than one business". He also mentions that people did not congregate for eating meals.

The Indian character was undoubtedly admired by Megasthenes. He says that as a people Indians behaved in an orderly manner and did not like useless disturbances. They were so honest that they generally found it unnecessary to lock their houses. Hardly any thefts were committed. We are also told that Indians did not have any written laws. They regulated their affairs according to their customs and traditions. They did not care for written contracts and had no desire to seek support from the law. In business deals, they took a man at his word. Virtue was greatly valued. Truth was so highly honoured that the hands and feet of false witnesses were cut off. They respected those amongst them who were wise. They sang songs in praise of their great men and tried to follow in their footsteps.

The magnificence of the Mauryan capital, Pataliputra, was renowned. Situated on the bank of the Ganga, it was nine miles long and one and a half miles broad. The city wall, built of timber, had sixty-four drawbridges and five hundred and seventy towers. A deep moat surrounded it and prevented outsiders from entering. Houses were of two or three storeys and, as they were constructed of wood, an elaborate system of fire precautions was enforced.

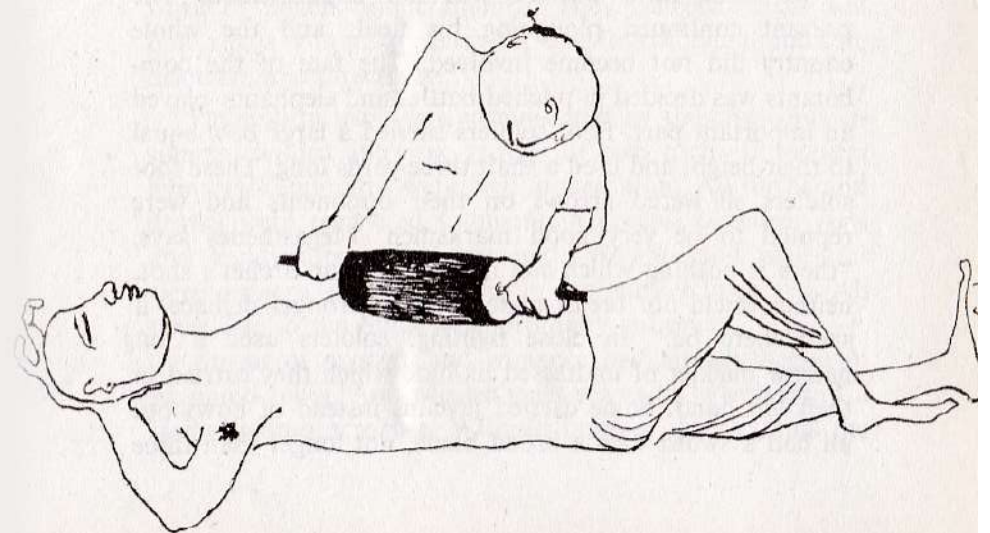
At the centre of the city was the royal palace surrounded by a walled park with artificial lakes, fish-ponds and exotic birds. The palace itself was of wood plated with gold and silver and elaborately ornamented.

The King dressed in muslin cloth embroidered with gold



thread was carried in a golden palanquin. Most people travelled on horseback. Those who were better off rode camels, but riding an ass was considered contemptible and inferior. The wealthier class used elephants and sometimes chariots.

The chief amusements were gambling, ox races, animal fights and contests between wrestlers. The common people seemed happy, while the wealthy class led a luxurious and comfortable life. Megasthenes mentions that they were massaged with smooth sticks of ebony.



In spite of all his power and the riches that surrounded him, the King was in constant fear of being assassinated. He took very stringent precautions for his security—all food was tasted in his presence and he never slept in the same room for two nights in a row. He was, at all times, guarded by a band of armed women and while out hunting his way was lined with ropes, the crossing of which was instantly punished with death. An elaborate web of spies kept him informed of the secrets of the city.

Chandragupta maintained a large standing army of seven lakh men for the defence of his empire. A group of thirty commissioners administered the army which was divided into six departments: (1) admiralty, (2) transport and supplies including labourers, (3) infantry, (4) cavalry, (5) chariots (ox-driven) and (6) elephants.

In those days warfare was not sophisticated. The peasant continued ploughing his fields and the whole country did not become involved. The fate of the combatants was decided in pitched battles and elephants played an important part. Foot soldiers carried a large bow equal to their height and used a shaft three yards long. These foot soldiers showered arrows on their opponents and were reputed to be very good marksmen. Megasthenes says, "there is nothing which can resist an Indian archer's shot, neither shield nor breast-plate nor any stronger defence, if such there be." In close fighting, soldiers used a long narrow buckler of undressed ox-hide which they carried in their left hand. Some carried javelins instead of bows but all had a sword with a broad blade, not longer than three

cubits, which they handled with both hands.

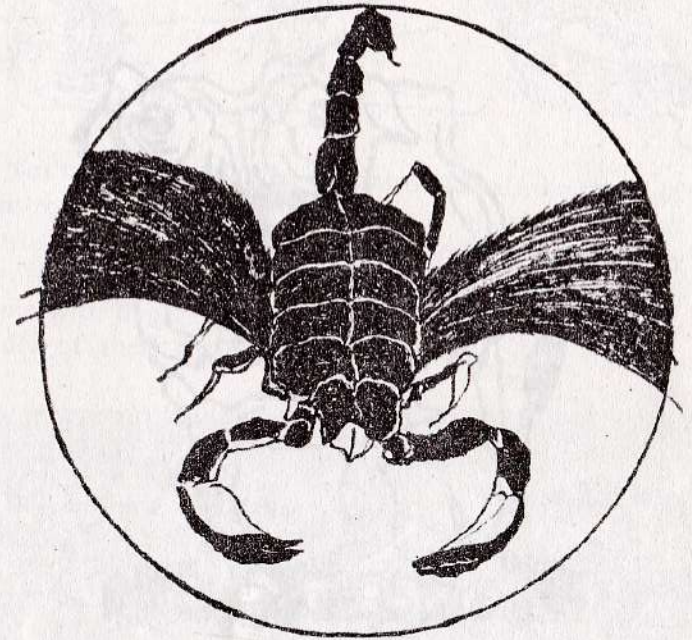
Horsemen rode bare-back and carried two lances and a shorter buckler. Instead of a bridle and bit placed in the horse's mouth, a circular piece of raw ox-hide studded with pricks was put round the mouth. This painful device served to prod the animal.

Both the animals and weapons of war belonged to the King and were returned to the stables and armoury when not required. Being constantly threatened by internal rebellion and invasions from outside, the Emperor used his large, strong army to maintain his hold on his extensive empire.

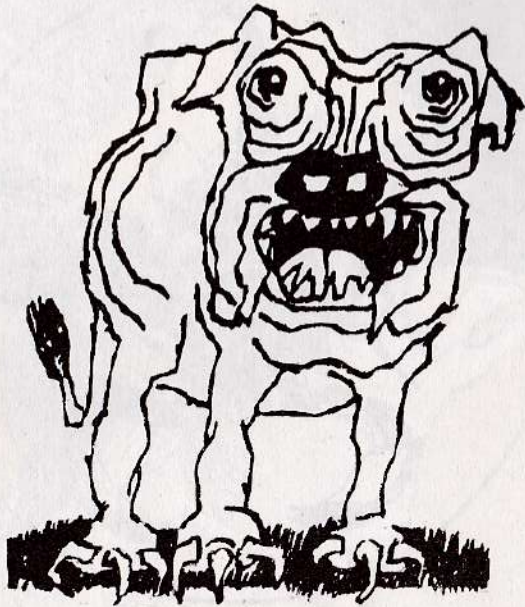
Apart from army commissioners, there were market commissioners who administered the whole country. They got the land measured for taxation and hereditary purposes. They improved river communications and supervised the work of miners and craftsmen. They collected taxes and built roads with pillars every third or fourth mile to indicate distances and directions.

Pataliputra itself was administered by the city commissioners divided into six groups of five each. Foreigners living in Pataliputra were well looked after. All births and deaths were registered to maintain a census record. Arts and handicrafts were supervised. Weights and measures were properly fixed and sales in the market inspected. All taxes due to the State were promptly collected.

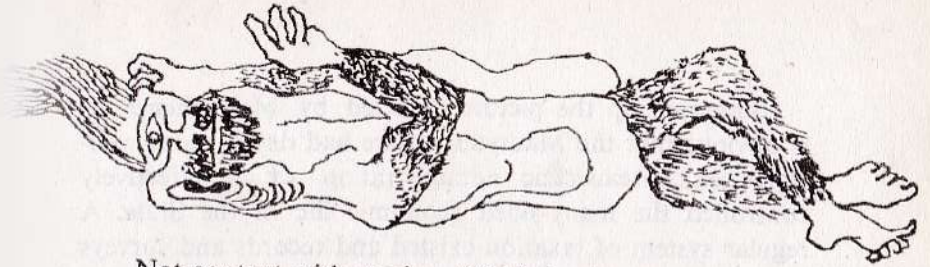
An air of mystery and romance had already begun to surround India. And Megasthenes seems to have been of a fairly credulous nature. Without humour, he recounts the



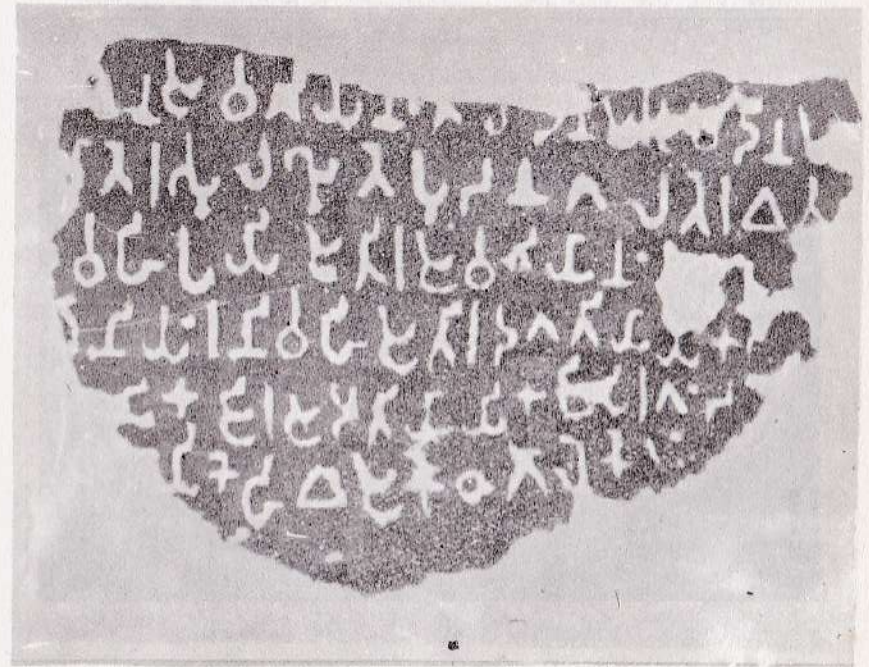
absurd tales he was told. According to him, India abounded in unusual creatures. He tells us of gold-digging ants in the lower Indus region where the Derdae lived. Ants, as large as foxes, burrowed holes and accidentally brought out a lot of gold dust. The neighbouring people arrived stealthily on beasts and, to elude discovery, they lay down pieces of the flesh of wild animals to keep the ants occupied while they



collected the gold dust. Sometimes they were able to gather the gold dust without being detected. But on other occasions if the ants saw them, they went in pursuit and, having overtaken them, killed them along with their animals. Megasthenes also mentions two-cubit-long reptiles with wings bat-like large winged scorpions and dogs who bit so vehemently that their eyes got distorted and fell out!



Not content with stories of fabled animals, he wrote of monstrous people nine feet tall, some of whom had no nostrils. Others who had such long ears that when asleep they touched their feet, some who had heels in front, people with dog's ears and still others with an eye in the middle of their forehead!



Summing up the picture depicted by Megasthenes, it is obvious that the Mauryan empire had developed a well-organised, bureaucratic administration which effectively controlled the many-sided economic life of the State. A regular system of taxation existed and records and surveys of the land were efficiently maintained. Law and order did not pose much of a problem. People were usually honest, few thefts were committed and violence was firmly condemned. The administration of justice was energetic and was presided over personally by the Emperor in open court. The common people seemed happy and were seldom concerned with the politics and intrigues that surrounded the royal court.

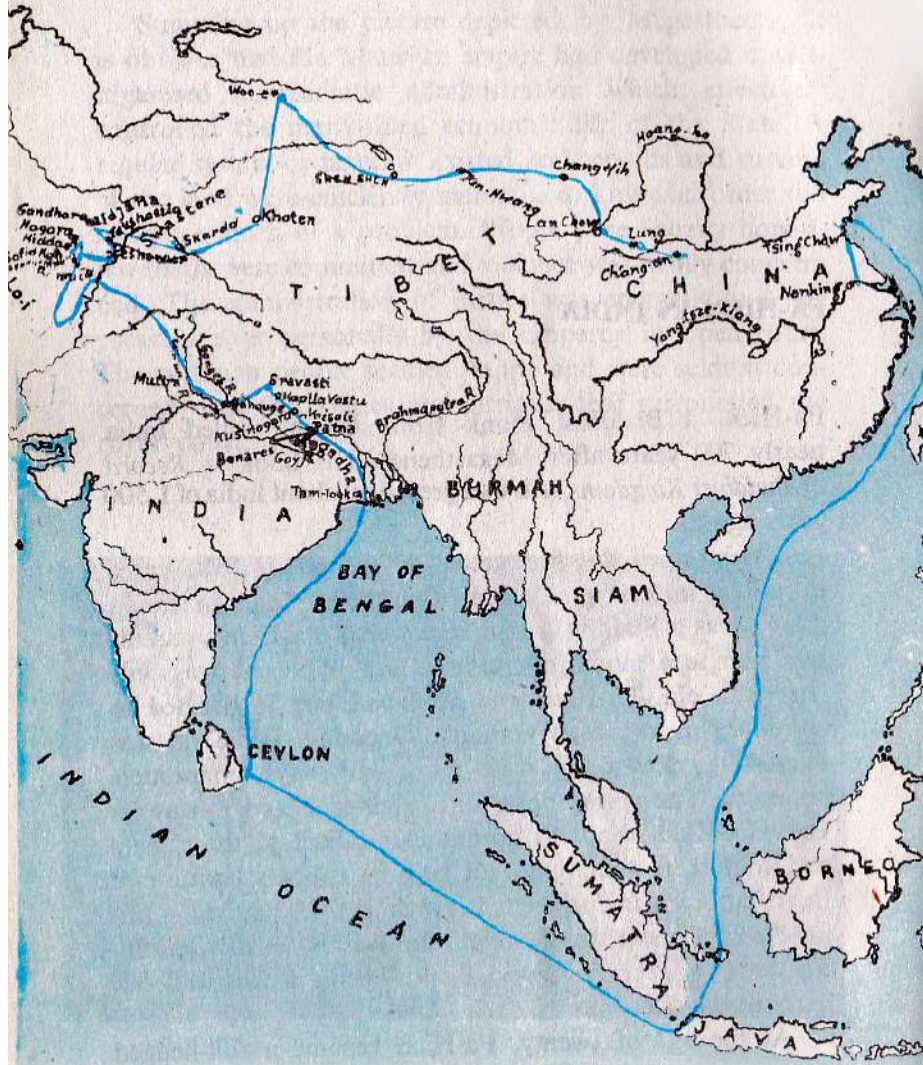


FA-HIEN IN INDIA

Fa-Hien, a Buddhist monk from China, visited India nearly 700 years after Megasthenes. His book *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* tells us a great deal about India of 1,500 years ago.

The story of this first great Chinese pilgrim who came to India is interesting. Deciding that their young son should grow up as a Buddhist monk (Sramana), Fa-Hien's parents sent him to a monastery as a trainee. When he was only ten years old, Fa-Hien was orphaned but he decided to continue his monastic training. One day, while he was harvesting rice along with the other boys, marauders appeared. The young boys were frightened and ran away. Only Fa-Hien stood his ground. He talked to the thieves and told them that they had become robbers because of their bad *karmas* during their previous lives. If they continued in their evil ways, their future would be darker still. The thieves were impressed by Fa-Hien's words and left without the rice.

At the age of twenty, Fa-Hien became a full-fledged



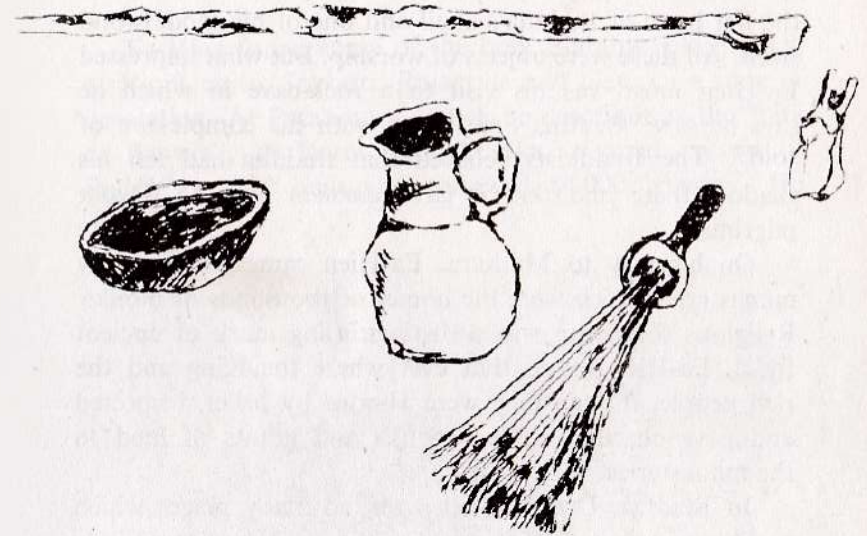
monk and five years later in 399 A.D. he decided to go to India. He was away from home for fourteen years, out of which he spent six years travelling, six years in India and two years in Ceylon. His voyage covered thousands of miles over mountains and across oceans. His primary objective as a devout Buddhist was to visit holy Buddhist places and also to collect Buddhist books and relics. After the introduction of Buddhism into China, monasteries had been built and some of the sacred books translated into Chinese. The Chinese monks were, however, not quite sure about the code of discipline that they had to observe. They also wanted to know the exact meaning of what Buddha had preached. This desire continued to bring many Buddhist monks and scholars to India.

Let us broadly recapitulate some of the events since the days of Megasthenes. After the Mauryas, the Kushans, a foreign tribe, established under Kanishka a vast empire which extended from Central Asia to Mathura. Becoming a follower of Buddha, Kanishka spread the faith in his territories, from where it spread to China and other lands. By the time Fa-Hien set out on his travels, the Kushan empire had long since vanished but Buddhism still prevailed in the countries in which it had held sway.

Buddhism was the prevailing religion in Khotan (modern Sinkiang) and elsewhere even three hundred years after Kanishka. Fa-Hien found thousands of monks living a disciplined life in the monasteries. One particular monastery which took 80 years to build had been constructed during the reign of three rulers. The hall of Buddha in this monas-

tery had excellent carvings with beautiful inlay work. It was magnificent with beams, pillars, doors and windows overlaid with gold leaves. The rooms for the use of the monks were so well decorated that Fa-Hien could not find words to describe their beauty.

The monks in the monasteries came to dinner when a bell was rung. They all sat down silently, making signs for food with their hands. Fa-Hien's description of religious processions strikes a familiar note. On the occasion of festivals, images of Buddha and Hindu gods were carried



in cars decorated with silk streamers and canopies. The King and Queen performed worship (*arti*) with incense and flowers and then gave away their wealth in charity.

When Fa-Hien visited India, Chandragupta Vikramaditya was the reigning monarch. At Skardo in Kashmir, the King held a *Panchparishad* or five-yearly assembly at the end of which he and his ministers gave gifts to the monks. In a monastery here, Fa-Hien saw various relics including a spitoon and a tooth of Buddha. In Gandhara he saw a footprint of Buddha on a rock. At Purushapur (Peshawar) he saw the great tope which Kanishka had built, and enshrined in another magnificent tope, Buddha's alms-bowl,

the flat bone of Buddha's skull and one of his sandalwood staffs. All these were objects of worship. But what impressed Fa-Hien most was his visit to a rock-cave in which he says he saw "Buddha's real form, with his complexion of gold." The Buddhists believed that Buddha had left his shadow there and that it gave *darshan* only to devout pilgrims.

On his way to Mathura, Fa-Hien came across many monasteries which were the homes of thousands of monks. Religious toleration was a distinguishing mark of ancient India. Fa-Hien found that everywhere the King and the rich people, though they were Hindus by belief, respected and gave charities to the monks and grants of land to the monasteries.

In Madhya Desh, Fa-Hien visited many places which had become centres of pilgrimage and were considered holy because here Buddha had bathed, cut his hair or pared his nails. Fa-Hien unquestioningly believed all the miracles he recorded as having been performed by Buddha.

The most remarkable fact about monastic life was that monks and nuns of different sects of Buddhism lived side by side. Although their views differed, they were tolerant and offered hospitality without distinction to all monks and travellers who passed their way.

Another important fact related by Fa-Hien is that King Prasenajit of Koshaia, a contemporary of Buddha, was the first to make an image of Buddha in sandalwood which was worshipped. So idol-worship began in a small way in Buddha's time or not long afterwards.

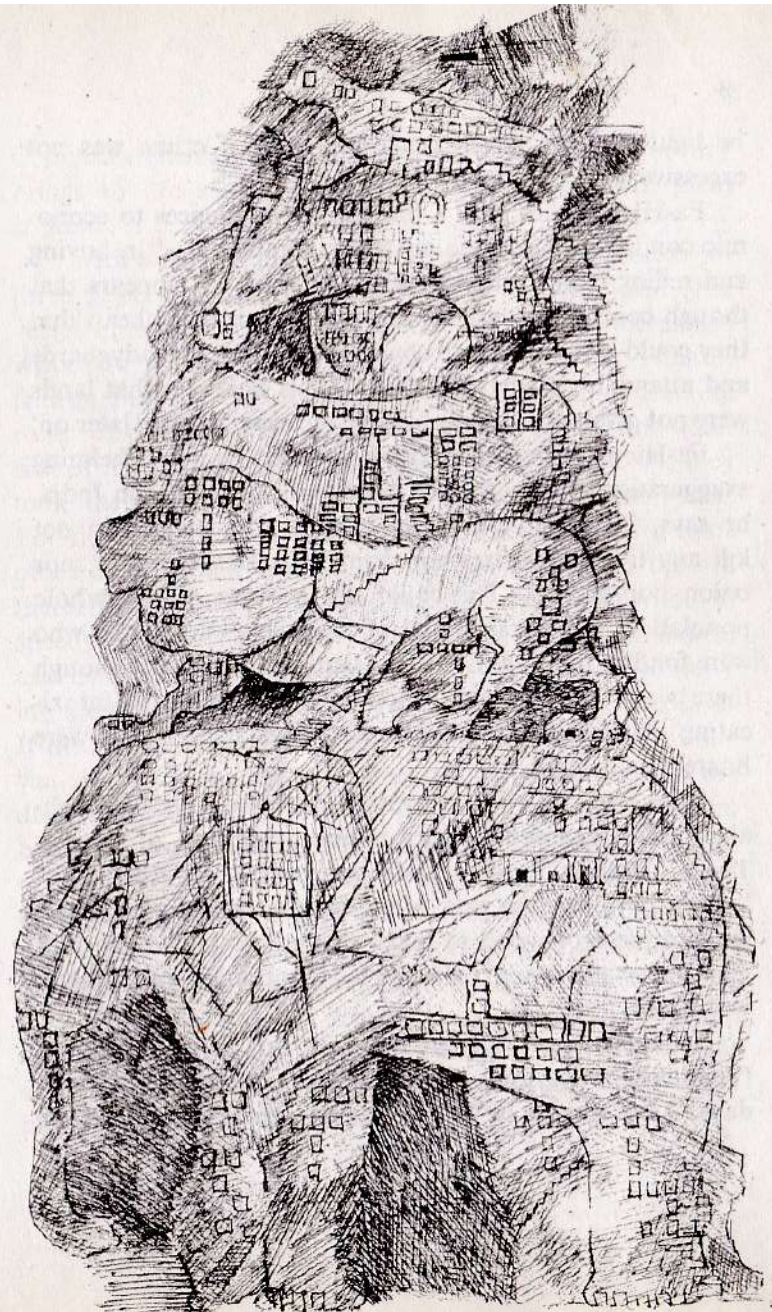
Fa-Hien found some of the holy Buddhist places such as Kapilavastu, Sravasti, Rajagriha and Gaya in a state of desolation. At Pataliputra, which he describes as the "city of flowers", he learnt that Ashoka, a great patron of Buddhism, had built and endowed 84,000 'viharas'. He



marvelled at the royal palace and said, "the royal palace and halls in the midst of the city which exist now as of old were all made by spirits which he (Ashoka) employed and which piled up the stones, reared the walls and gates and executed the elegant carvings and inlaid sculpture work in a way in which no human hands of this world could accomplish". He also admired the Ashokan pillar with its lion capital near Pataliputra.

On going to the Dakshina Fa-Hien learnt about the Pigeon Monastery which reflected the skill of the builders of ancient India. Built out of a large hill-rock, it had five storeys. The lowest storey, having the form of an elephant, had 500 apartments; the second, having the form of a lion, had 400 apartments; the third, having the form of a horse, had 300 apartments; the fourth, having the form of an ox, had 200 apartments and the fifth, having the form of a pigeon, had 100 apartments. A spring at the top supplied water to all the storeys. All over the apartments, windows had been built to admit light. Fa-Hien lived in this monastery for three years. He learnt Sanskrit and managed to collect some important works.

The administration of justice in the Middle Kingdom which comprised most of present-day U.P. and which was even then thickly populated, won Fa-Hien's approval. He says, "the King governs without decapitation or (other) corporal punishments. Criminals are simply fined, lightly or heavily, according to the circumstances (of each case). Even in cases of repeated attempts of wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off." Punishments could



be light and the government mild only if crime was not excessive.

Fa-Hien makes only a few passing references to economic conditions but these are very illuminating. "In buying and selling commodities they use cowries." It appears that though coins were current, most goods were so cheap that they could be bought with cowries. "The King's bodyguards and attendants all have salaries." This indicates that lands were not given as jagirs, as became the usual custom later on.

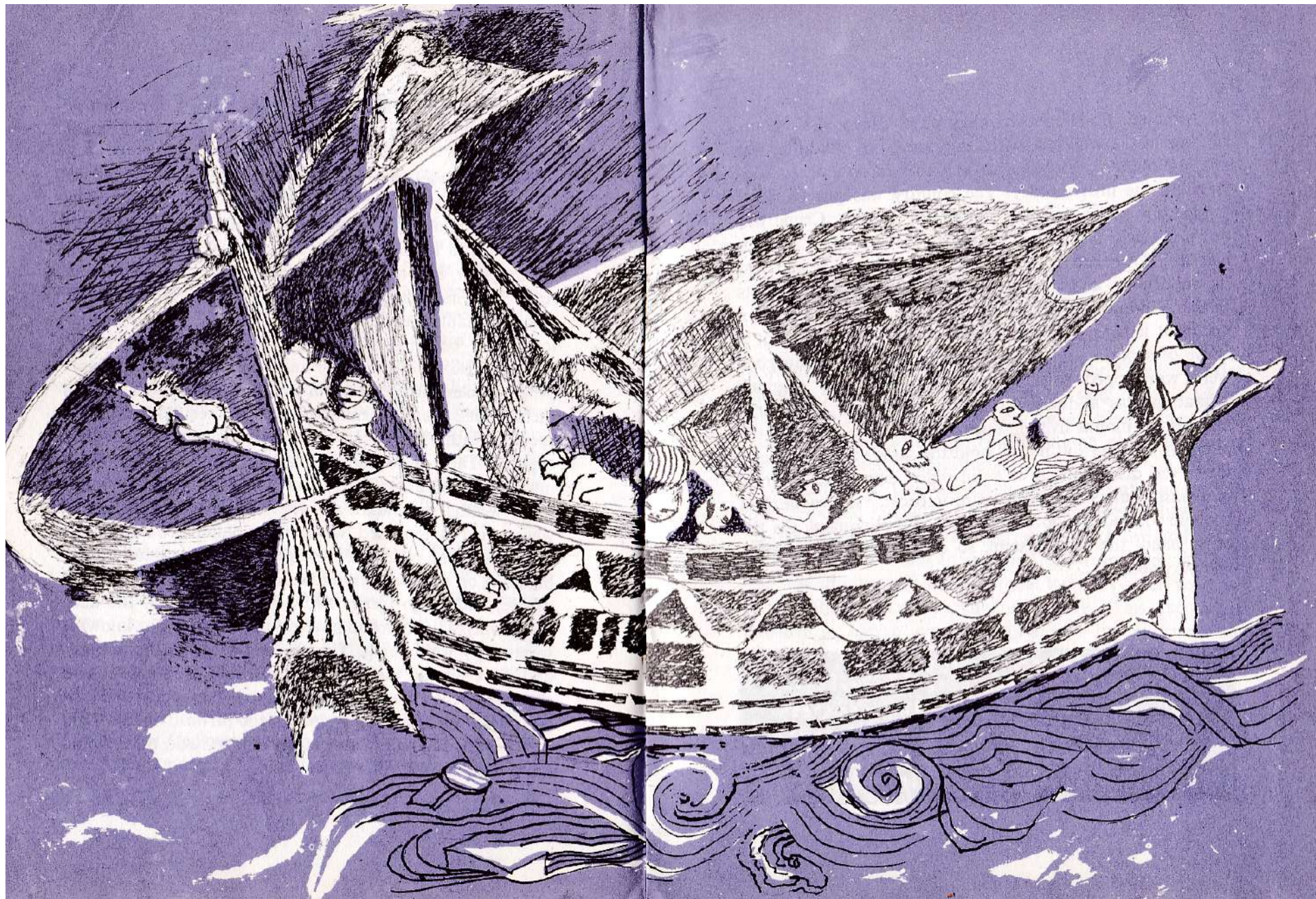
Fa-Hien's admiration often resulted in overwhelming exaggeration. Regarding the prevalence of *ahimsa* in India, he says, "through the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor onion nor garlic." This could not be true of the whole population and certainly not of the rulers and nobles who were fond of hunting. Even Fa-Hien admitted that although there were "no butchers' shops and no dealers in intoxicating drinks", the Chandalas or untouchables who were hunters sold meat.

Untouchability was rigorously observed. The untouchables were regarded as very inferior members of society. The Chandalas lived outside the towns. Fa-Hien adds, "when they enter the gate of a city or a market-place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them."

After Fa-Hien's stay in India, he left from Tamralipti (Tamluk) for Ceylon—a voyage which took him fourteen days. After staying in Ceylon for two years he returned to

China. Fa-Hien's graphic description of his return journey brings to life some of the hazards he faced with great courage.

"With a favourable wind, they proceeded eastwards for three days, and then they encountered a great wind. The vessel sprang a leak and the water came in. The merchants wished to go to the smaller vessel; but the men on board, fearing that too many would come, cut the connecting rope. The merchants were greatly alarmed, feeling their risk of instant death. Afraid that the vessel would fill, they took their bulky goods and threw them into the water. Fa-Hien also took his pitcher and washing-basin, with some other articles, and cast them into the sea... On the sea (hereabouts) there are many pirates, to meet with whom is speedy death. The great ocean spreads out, a boundless expanse. There is no knowing east or west; only by observing the sun, moon and stars was it possible to go forward. If the weather were dark and rainy, (the ship) went as she was carried by the wind, without any definite course. In the darkness of the night, only the great waves were to be seen, breaking on one another, and emitting a brightness like that of fire, with huge turtles and other monsters of the deep (all about). The merchants were full of terror, not knowing where they were going. The sea was deep and bottomless, and there was no place where they could drop anchor and stop. But when the sky became clear, they could tell east and west, and (the ship) again went forward in the right direction. If she had come on any hidden rock, there would have been no way of escape."



Although Fa-Hien's record is largely devoted to places of worship connected with the name of Buddha, his passing observations give us valuable information about India in the fifth century. The country was peaceful and prosperous under the mild rule of the Guptas. Crime was not prevalent. The overall impression is that while Buddhism still flourished in countries outside India, it had lost its importance and royal patronage within the land of its birth. Hinduism was in the ascendant again. Religion occupied a high place in people's lives, but it was not a cause of strife among them. Buddha and the Hindu gods were worshipped together on holy days and religious toleration was a dominant feature of Indian life. Large numbers of monks lived in ancient monasteries all over the country, but they did not all hold the same views, although they lived disciplined lives as in olden days. The doctrine of *ahimsa*, from which vegetarianism became the vogue, had become common to both Buddhism and Hinduism. On the other hand, the caste system, so discouraged by Buddha, had survived.



INDIA IN HIUEN TSANG'S TIME

Two hundred years after Fa-Hien, another Chinese pilgrim came to India. His name was Hiuen Tsang. He has left in his *Travels or Records of Western Lands*, comprising twelve books, a detailed account of all that he observed during his long journey through India.

Hiuen Tsang was the youngest male member of an old and respected family of China. He was very intelligent, so at the age of thirteen his father sent him to live and study at a monastery under the supervision of an elder brother. He was admitted without the usual test. For seven years he visited the best-known religious schools. This experience created in him a growing admiration for monastic life and Hiuen Tsang resolved to become a monk himself.

Becoming a fully qualified monk at the age of twenty, Hiuen Tsang realised that there was a great deal of ignorance about Buddhism. In spite of his profound learning, he was not very clear about the Buddhist religious rules. He thought that if only he could go to India and study the original works, he would be able to resolve his doubts.



Therefore, like Fa-Hien, he decided at the age of twenty-nine to visit the holy places of India, to study with the great Buddhist scholars there, and to obtain accurate knowledge about the law which Buddha had preached.

The Chinese Emperor refused him permission to go but he escaped quietly from the country in 629 A.D. As the map of his travels shows, he came to India by the northern overland route and returned home by the southern overland route. Travel facilities were very meagre in those days and the hazards and difficulties of a journey which covered over 15,000 miles across deserts, over mountains and into strange lands were immense. Like Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang was away from home for about fifteen years (629-644 A.D.). The greater part of this he spent in the kingdom of Harsha and in travelling all over India.

What did Hiuen Tsang have to say about the condition of Buddhism in the lands he visited two hundred years after Fa-Hien? Buddhism was greatly respected and the rulers of kingdoms in Central Asia helped the pilgrim in every way. One ruler in particular treated him very well. He wanted to keep him forever in his kingdom to guide his people in the Buddhist faith. Hiuen Tsang was troubled and unhappy as he had not undertaken his long journey for such a purpose. Fearing that the King might use force to keep him in his kingdom, Hiuen Tsang went on hunger strike. When this was conveyed to the King, he relented. He agreed to let Hiuen Tsang go but extracted a promise from him that he would visit him on his return journey.

After crossing mountains covered with perpetual snow,

Hiuen Tsang entered the kingdom of a Turkish ruler who held court in splendid gold-embroidered tents. He and his nobles were fond of drinking and music. He invited Hiuen Tsang to his court and received him very hospitably. On hearing the pilgrim's plans, the Khan asked, "Why do you want to go to India? It is a hot country whose people are known to be rude to outsiders." But Hiuen Tsang's mind was made up. The Khan did not wish to stand in his way. On the other hand, he greatly helped the pilgrim on his journey. Knowing that Hiuen Tsang would not be able to understand the language of the people of Afghanistan, he sent a guide with him to act as an interpreter.

At Balkh and Bamiyan, Hiuen Tsang found Buddhism flourishing even 500 years after its introduction by Kanishka. He saw numerous monuments and relics. Like Fa-Hien before him, he was shown Buddha's water-jug, his broom and one of his teeth, which were worshipped on festivals by thousands of monks who were living in the monasteries.

After crossing the Hindu Kush, he entered the Kabul valley where Buddhism was the prevailing faith. Most Buddhist monuments were connected with some miracle or other. Even Hiuen Tsang believed that he saw Buddha's shadow in a rock-cave a thousand years after his death.

As he entered India, probably through the Khyber Pass, Hiuen Tsang found most towns and villages desolate in the north-western area. Only the Peshawar valley was, as it still is, rich in crops and fruit. Like Megasthenes he was amazed to see sugar produced from sugarcane. Learning at Purusha-

pur (Peshawar) that Panini, the celebrated grammarian of the fourth century B.C., came from this area, he went northwards towards Swat to see his birth-place.

On crossing the Indus, he made straight for Kashmir which since Kanishka's day was noted for its learning. There he found a large number of stupas and monasteries with monks living in them. The ruler of Kashmir honoured him and gave him twenty scribes to help him copy the religious books he wanted. Hiuen Tsang stayed here two years to complete his work.

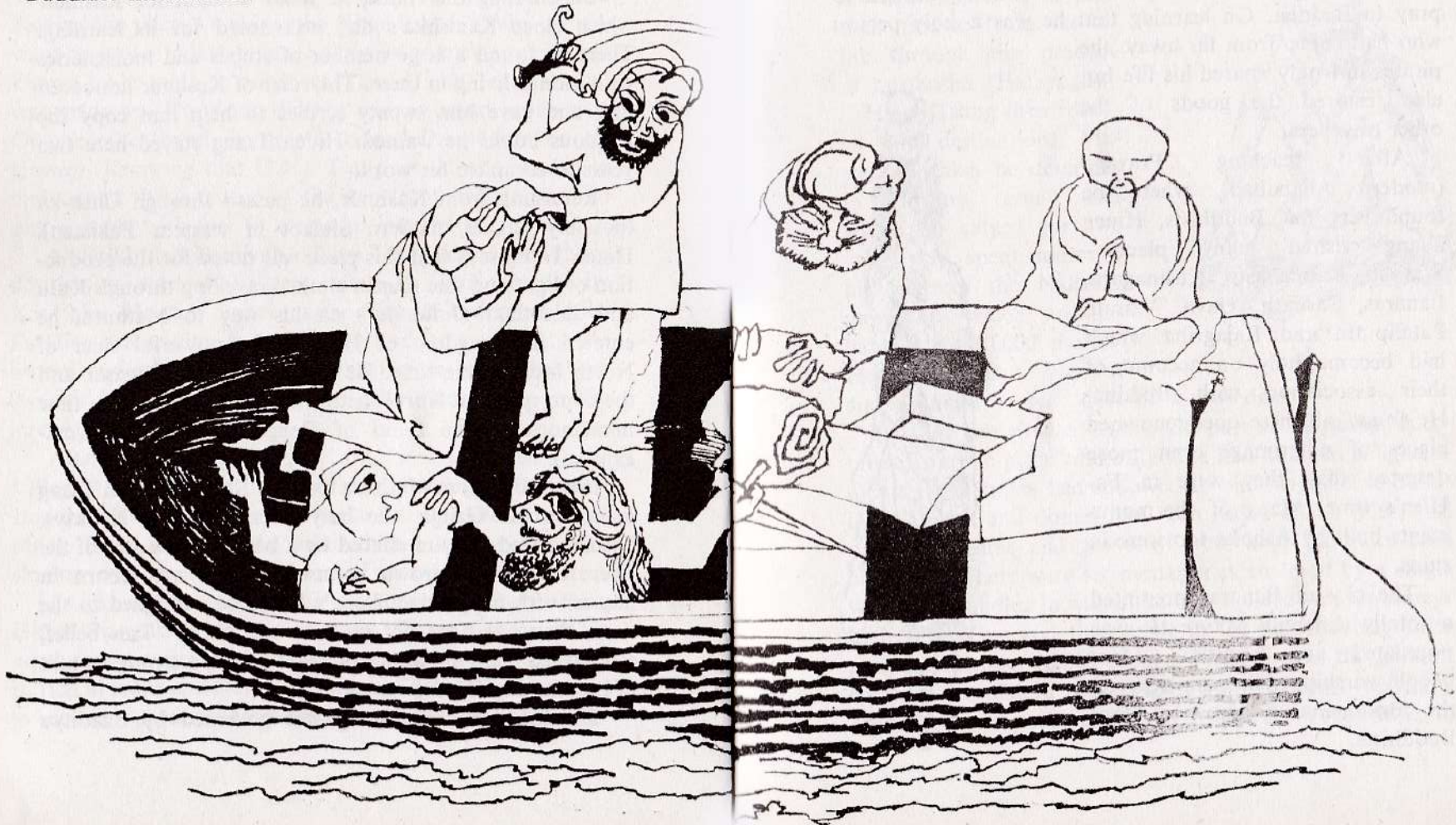
Returning from Kashmir, he passed through Cheh-ka (possibly Sakala, modern Sialkot in western Pakistan). Hiuen Tsang says that this place was noted for the production of light and fine muslin cloth. Travelling through Kulu and Jalandhar (Jullundur) on his way to Mathura, he entered the kingdom of Harsha, the powerful ruler of North India at the time. He comments that Thanesar and the country round Kurukshetra had been known from time immemorial as the Land of Religious Merit (Dharma-kshetra).

Proceeding from Mathura towards Kanauj, Hiuen Tsang mentions the Ganga, the holy river of India. He says, "accumulated sins are effaced by a bath in the water of the river: those who drown themselves in it are reborn in heaven with happiness: if one's bones be consigned to the river, then one does not go to a bad place." This belief, established many hundreds of years ago, is a strong feature of present-day Hinduism.

The kingdom of Kanauj was governed by Siladitya

(Harshavardhana). Hiuen Tsang's writings show Harsha as a good and powerful ruler. He built rest-houses for travellers throughout his kingdom and a large number of Buddhist monasteries.

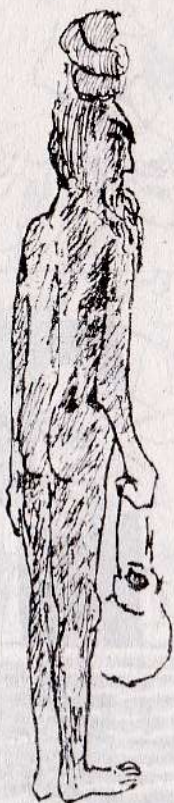
Sailing down the Ganga, Hiuen Tsang's boat was attacked by a band of pirates. These people worshipped Durga and, like the Thugs of a later day, offered human



sacrifice to the deity. They wanted to sacrifice the handsomest man and so chose Hiuen Tsang. Hiuen Tsang showed no sign of fear. He only asked that he be allowed to pray to Buddha. On learning that he was a holy person who had come from far away, the pirates not only spared his life but also restored the goods of the other travellers.

After reaching Prayaga (modern Allahabad), where he found very few Buddhists, Hiuen Tsang visited many places—Sravasti, Kapilavastu, Kusinagara, Banaras, Sarnath, Gaya, Vaisali, Pataliputra and Rajagriha which had become holy on account of their association with Buddha. He found all these once-renowned places of pilgrimage even more deserted than they were in Fa-Hien's time. Many of the monuments built by Ashoka too were in ruins.

The city of Banaras presented a totally different picture. It was populated and wealthy. Most people worshipped Siva and revered the Brahmans. There were few Buddhists.



Sadhus wandered around, some naked, others covered with ashes and most of them appeared to seek their release from mortal life through the practice of austerities (Hatayoga).

Hiuen Tsang then reached his destination, Magadha, which he describes in glowing terms, and where he stayed for five years. He spent most of his time in the Nalanda monastery which was inhabited by 10,000 monks. Here he learnt Sanskrit and acquired a great deal of knowledge.

Nalanda was situated in the hilly part of Magadha, thirty miles from the place where Buddha had attained enlightenment. Pious rulers had endowed it with magnificent buildings. Towers and domes had been raised on all sides, and running streams and groves of trees kept the place cool and fresh. There were six monasteries enclosed by a single wall. The building in which the monks lived was six storeys high. The King and the people in the neighbouring cities maintained these 10,000 monks. Nalanda was the greatest centre of learning in India. Apart from Buddhist literature, all the sciences were studied here from the Vedas down to



medicine and arithmetic. Foreign students like the Chinese pilgrim came to Nalanda to dispel their ignorance. They were only accepted after a tough test of their existing knowledge. Only one or two out of every ten were admitted. Every day, a hundred professors lectured and each one of them was the author of ten or more books. The monks were given clothes, food, lodging and medicines without charge. Silabhadra, the Superior of the monastery, was a man of eminent virtue and learning. Hiuen Tsang paid homage to Silabhadra and was treated with great honour as a disciple. He was well looked after by two monks, one a Sramana and the other a Brahman. They took him out every day in a chariot, on an elephant or in a palanquin.

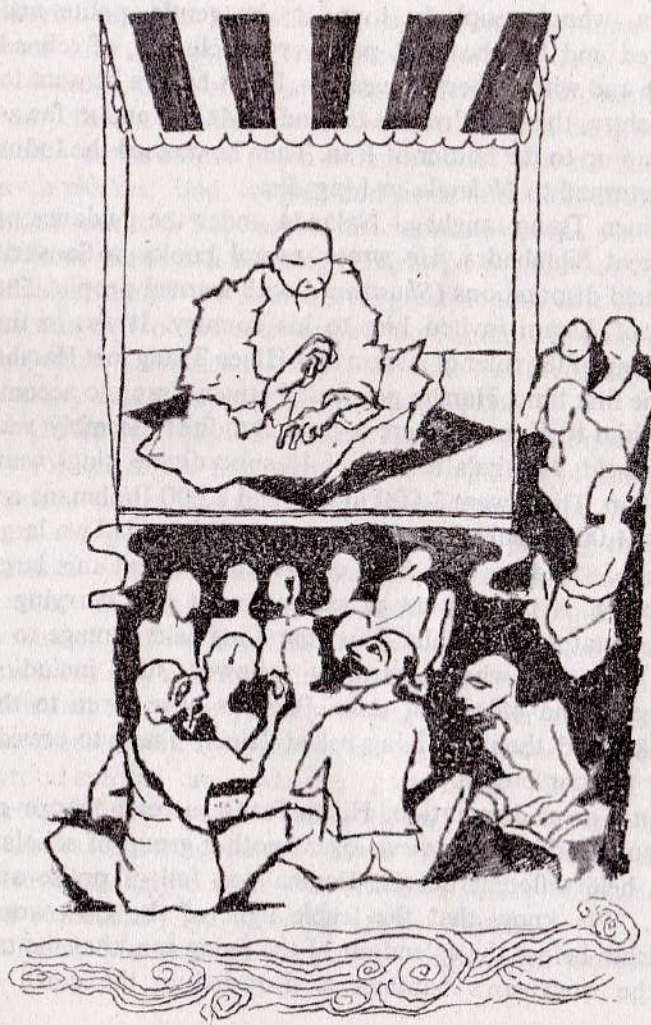
On leaving Magadha, Hiuen Tsang travelled through the rest of India. He first went to the kingdoms of Champa, Karnasuvarna, Samatata and Tamralipti. From there he went along the east coast of Orissa and passing through Kalinga went to south Koshala or Berar and thence to Andhra. He penetrated as far south as Kanchipura (Conjeeveram) in Dravida. Then he proceeded to Konkanapur which has not been identified. Striking westward he came to Maharashtra. Here he saw a large number of Buddhist monuments built by Ashoka. He says he found the people "proud-spirited and warlike, grateful for favours and revengeful for wrongs, self-sacrificing towards suppliants in distress and sanguinary to death with anyone who treated them insultingly". Such were the men whom Pulakesin II had successfully led in battle against Harsha.

From Maharashtra he passed on through Broach to

Malwa, whose people he found to be gentle, polite and cultured and for the most part very intelligent, of refined speech and with a liberal education. From Malwa he went to Saurashtra, then northwards to Sindh, Multan and as far as Makran up to the border of Iran. Then he crossed the Indus and returned to Nalanda in Magadha.

Hiuen Tsang taught at Nalanda under the guidance of the great Silabhadra. He wrote several books in Sanskrit and held disputations (*Shastrarth*) with learned people. The King of Assam invited him to his country. It was in the company of the ruler of Assam that Hiuen Tsang met Harsha for the first time. Harsha persuaded Hiuen Tsang to accompany him to Kanauj where a great Buddhist assembly was being held. Harsha's retinue of 18 subordinate kings went with him. There were 3,000 monks and 2,000 Brahmans and about 1,000 monks from the convent of Nalanda. Two large thatched buildings had been constructed to seat this large gathering. A magnificent procession went past carrying a golden statue of Buddha. First the King paid homage to it and then the whole assembly followed suit, including ministers and officers of state. Presents were given to the monks, and then the King asked Hiuen Tsang to preside over the conference.

In a great disputation, Hiuen Tsang successfully proved the superiority of his views over another group of scholars who held different beliefs. Harsha was full of praise and said, "We know that the feeble light of the glow-worm vanishes before the splendour of the rising sun, that the tap of the workman's hammer is drowned in the crash of



thunder; so, in the twinkling of an eye have the words of the apostles of error been confounded." Then Harsha rode with Hiuen Tsang on an elephant, and proclaimed to all the people the learning of the Chinese Master of the Law.

Now Hiuen Tsang was ready to return home. He took leave of the monks of Nalanda but then Harsha intervened and asked him to accompany him to Prayaga to see the sixth five-yearly assembly to be held at the Sangam.

This was a grand occasion. About 5,00,000 persons assembled at Prayaga to receive the royal alms. Several halls had been constructed to store quantities of gold, silver and articles of clothing which had been collected for distribution.

Religious worship preceded the dispensing of charities. On the first day, a golden image of Buddha was carried in a magnificent procession, on the second day that of the Sun God (Aditya) and on the third day that of Siva. Charities continued for seventy-five days. Hiuen Tsang too was offered one thousand pieces of gold. He refused the gift as he was interested in collecting knowledge, not wealth.

Soon after the assembly, the pilgrim left India with an immense collection of Buddhist materials. He had two golden, one silver and three sandalwood statues of Buddha. He also took away 150 relics of Buddha. His collection of 657 books was carried by 22 horses. The rest of his life was spent in translating these from Sanskrit into Chinese with the help of Chinese monks and two Indian scholars.

Clearly Hiuen Tsang's main interest was religion and not social organization. He mentions the four principal castes



but not their numerous divisions which probably existed in his time but which he did not understand. He observed that women were not allowed to marry a second time. Learning was confined to the Brahmins who studied their religious books up to the age of thirty.

He tells us that special people were appointed in India to write down an account of important events and that he consulted these records to obtain information about India. He was particularly struck by the extreme cleanliness of the people.

Hiuen Tsang states that India consisted of about seventy regional areas which functioned independently. The King's army was divided into four parts: infantry, cavalry, chariots

and elephants. The weapons of war had not changed over the years. Keeping in view how strictly criminals were dealt with, Hiuen Tsang thought that rough and ready punishment reduced crime.

Hiuen Tsang says that he saw Ashoka's stupas all over the country from the Hindu Kush mountains to the southern extremity of the Peninsula and from Tamralipti to Sindh and beyond. Hiuen Tsang's account, together with that of Fa-Hien, presents a vivid picture of Buddha's life and the deep influence of Buddhism in India and abroad. We realise how the practice of Buddhism changed and how present-day Hinduism evolved from the absorption of many Buddhist beliefs. For example, let us take one feature of Hinduism, namely, the worship of idols. Hiuen Tsang tells us that the first picture of Buddha was made in the reign of Bimbisara of Magadha. The outlines of his shadow on a piece of canvas were filled with colours. We remember Fa-Hien telling us that the first statue of Buddha was made of sandalwood in the kingdom of Koshala. So in spite of Buddha's injunctions against idolatry and due to the persuasive force of Hinduism, images and statues of Buddha soon became common. It appears that these statues and pictures of Buddha were originally made not for worship but only for recalling his holy presence. It was only years afterwards that miracles and superstitions came to be associated with them. Later on, the relics of Buddha, including his bones, ashes and articles of personal use, became the objects of worship along with pictures and statues. The number of these multiplied as time passed.



His footprints imprinted in stone were to be seen far and wide at places he had visited. Stupas were built at all these spots. Ashoka alone was said to have constructed 84,000 of such holy structures.

As time passed, the principal disciples of Buddha also came to be honoured and worshipped in a simple manner with prayers and flowers. Alongside them, the Hindu gods were worshipped in temples and during religious processions.

This process brought the two religions together. Finally, it produced present-day Hinduism with its many gods among whom Buddha is only one.

The same process was at work in the monasteries. Buddha had made the Sangha an order of monks who would observe the code of discipline laid down by him and keep his faith alive. Monasteries were built all over the country but no attempt was made to organise the Sangha as a uniform religious force. Monastic life was not confined to Buddhists. The Hindus and Jains also built their monasteries, sometimes side by side with the Buddhists, as in the Ajanta and Ellora caves. Here also a common pattern emerged over a period of time.

This idea of religious toleration was a notable feature of Indian cultural life. The individual was free to follow his own religious belief. Religious discussions or *shastrarths* were often held to clarify issues. The differences among the scholars of different sects were limited to arguments and did not impair their understanding of one another.

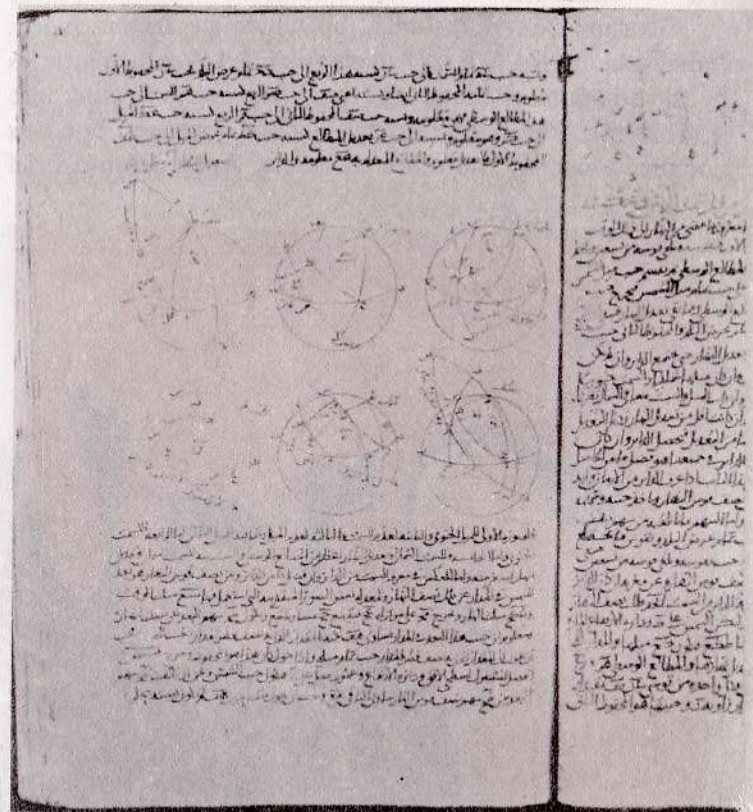
The seeds of religious toleration permeated life at all levels. The legacy of this feeling resulted in the present Constitution and the secular State which ensued with its provisions for treating all men as equal, irrespective of caste, religion or creed and giving them equal opportunities in the pursuit of happiness.

ALBERUNI'S INDIA

A Muslim scholar, Abu Raihan, who is generally known as Alberuni, was the fourth important traveller to come to India, about a thousand years ago.

Born in 973 A.D. in the territory of Khiva in Central Asia, Alberuni grew up to be a great scholar. By the age of forty, he was well-versed in all the Arabic works on science, mathematics, astronomy and astrology. He would have continued his literary activities in his homeland but for a strange turn in his circumstances. Khiva was invaded by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. This was the same Sultan Mahmud who had invaded India year after year in the early eleventh century. The Sultan overran Khiva and brought the chiefs of the country and Alberuni as prisoners to Ghazni. Later they were exiled and so Alberuni came to India.

Alberuni devoted the years of his exile to studying Sanskrit literature. He translated or wrote about twenty books in Arabic, among which his work on India is the most outstanding. This learned scholar found Hindu thought fascinating.



His main purpose was to describe the religions and the literary and scientific traditions of India. However, he has also given very valuable information concerning the country, manners, customs and superstitions of the people.

Alberuni says that India, by which he means North India, was originally a sea which was filled over the centuries by the alluvium of the great Himalayan rivers flowing into it. This has been confirmed by modern scientists, but was not mentioned by the other travellers. Apart from a brief

reference to India's mountains and rivers, he has given details about the distances of important places in all directions from Kanauj which was considered the centre of North India. Some of these places exist only as mounds or ruined cities today.



Writing about the animals of India, Alberuni stated that the rivers of North India teemed with crocodiles. There were rhinoceroses in many areas. However, like Megasthenes, he refers to the existence of a mythical creature. It was reported to him that there was a strange animal known as a *Sharava* found in the plain of the Konkan. In addition to the usual four feet on which it stood, it had four feet on its back. It had the shape of a buffalo and was larger than a rhinoceros. It was fierce and violent and lifted its victims and imprisoned them within the four feet on its back. When in a temper, it climbed a mountain and leapt forward to fight with thunder. Alberuni was also told that there were four-eyed gazelles or antelopes in India.

The difference between the tales of Megasthenes and Alberuni is that the credulous Greek believed what he was told concerning the "gold-digging ants", while the scientifically-minded Arab just reported what he had heard about the *Sharavas* and gazelles.

Alberuni wanted to write about the Indians and their achievements but found the people difficult to understand. Their literary works in classical Sanskrit were in verse and were often remembered by heart. And Sanskrit was a more difficult language than Arabic or Persian.

Apart from this, the attitude of the Indians was unhelpful. They were vain and narrow-minded and had become so insular that, while completely uncritical of their own customs and manners, they were prejudiced against all foreigners. They called them *mlechhas* and despised their ways, customs, manners and even the style of their dress

merely because these were different. In Alberuni's words:

"The Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs... and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it (their knowledge) from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner."

Alberuni recorded many miscellaneous observations concerning the customs and way of life that he observed. He tells us that the Hindus washed their feet first and then their faces and grew their nails long. They ate singly, chewed *pan* and drank wine before taking their meal. They rode bare-back on horses and kept their dagger on the right side. They shook hands by grasping the hand of a person on the convex side. They entered a house without permission but only left when permitted. When assembled, they sat cross-legged. They spat and blew their noses without respect for the older people present. They handed over things by throwing them at the other person. Four people played a game of chess and not two.

As for dress, some people just wore a rag round their loins. Others used a large piece of cloth right down to the feet. The *sidar* covered the head and upper part of the breast and neck. Men wore ear-rings and arm-rings like women. The *kurikas* or short shirts from the shoulder to the middle of the body were worn only by females.

In spite of criticizing the Indians as vain and narrow-minded, Alberuni was not blind to their good points. He admired them for their true picture of God. Basing this

view on Patanjali and the *Bhagwad Gita*, he wrote:

"The Hindus believe with regard to God that He is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free will, almighty, all-wise, living, giving life, ruling, preserving."

But this was not true of all Hindus. The views of the common, illiterate people about God were different. He despised their practice of making idols.

Alberuni was a keen observer of the religious practices of the Hindus. He has stated that Hindu pilgrims went to holy places like Varanasi, Pushkar, Thanesar and Multan. They threw the bones of the dead into the holy Ganga and believed in alms-giving. They avoided certain articles of food as impure and observed fasts on important occasions to gain religious merit. They were superstitious and attached a great deal of importance to omens in their daily lives. They settled their disputes by oaths and ordeals rather than by recourse to law.

Alberuni draws a picture of a rigid caste structure. The Hindus preserved the purity of a caste by preventing intermixture and by requiring all its members to follow their traditional occupation. A Brahman was expected to spend his whole life in religious pursuits. Likewise, the members of the other castes were expected to observe their *dharma* by performing their traditional duties. But everyone was fully entitled to worship God in the way he wished. If anyone gave up the duties of his caste and began to perform those of another, his action was considered sinful because it upset the social order. In this way, caste came to be attached to birth and was accepted unquestioningly.

Did Alberuni notice the existence of the untouchables? The answer is yes. The low castes and untouchables were consigned to an inferior position even in his time. These people known as *Antyajas* lived outside villages or towns and were below the Sudras in the social order. They were themselves divided into eight castes: jugglers, basket-and shield-makers, fishers and hunters of wild animals and of birds, fullers, shoe-makers and weavers. Yet others like the Hadi, Doma, Chandala and Bhadatau were not even reckoned amongst any caste. They did the dirty work, such as cleaning villages and other menial services. They formed a class by themselves, distinguished by their occupations. The worst of all were the Bhadatau who ate the flesh of dead animals.

The castes were socially isolated from one another. Even members of the same caste sitting together to eat made a barrier between their two seats by placing a board between them. Even drawing a line between them was considered sufficient for this purpose. Food was served to every individual on a separate plate and no one was expected to help himself out of a common dish.

Alberuni's book also explains the Indian system of astronomy and astrology as given in the five *Siddhantas*. He described the Indian concept of the earth and the planets, their size, movements and conjunction, the lunar and solar eclipses, latitudes and longitudes, instruments of observation and many other astronomical features. Though Indian mathematicians and astronomers were knowledgeable, they did not pursue this knowledge to its logical



conclusion. They accepted many traditional ideas about the creation of the earth and matter, space and time and its division as given in the *Puranas*. The cause of science thus suffered, according to Alberuni.

Medicine was considered as high a branch of knowledge as astronomy. Charak, whose book had been translated into Arabic, was regarded as the best writer on the subject. It was believed that the only treatment for snake-bite was various kinds of charms.

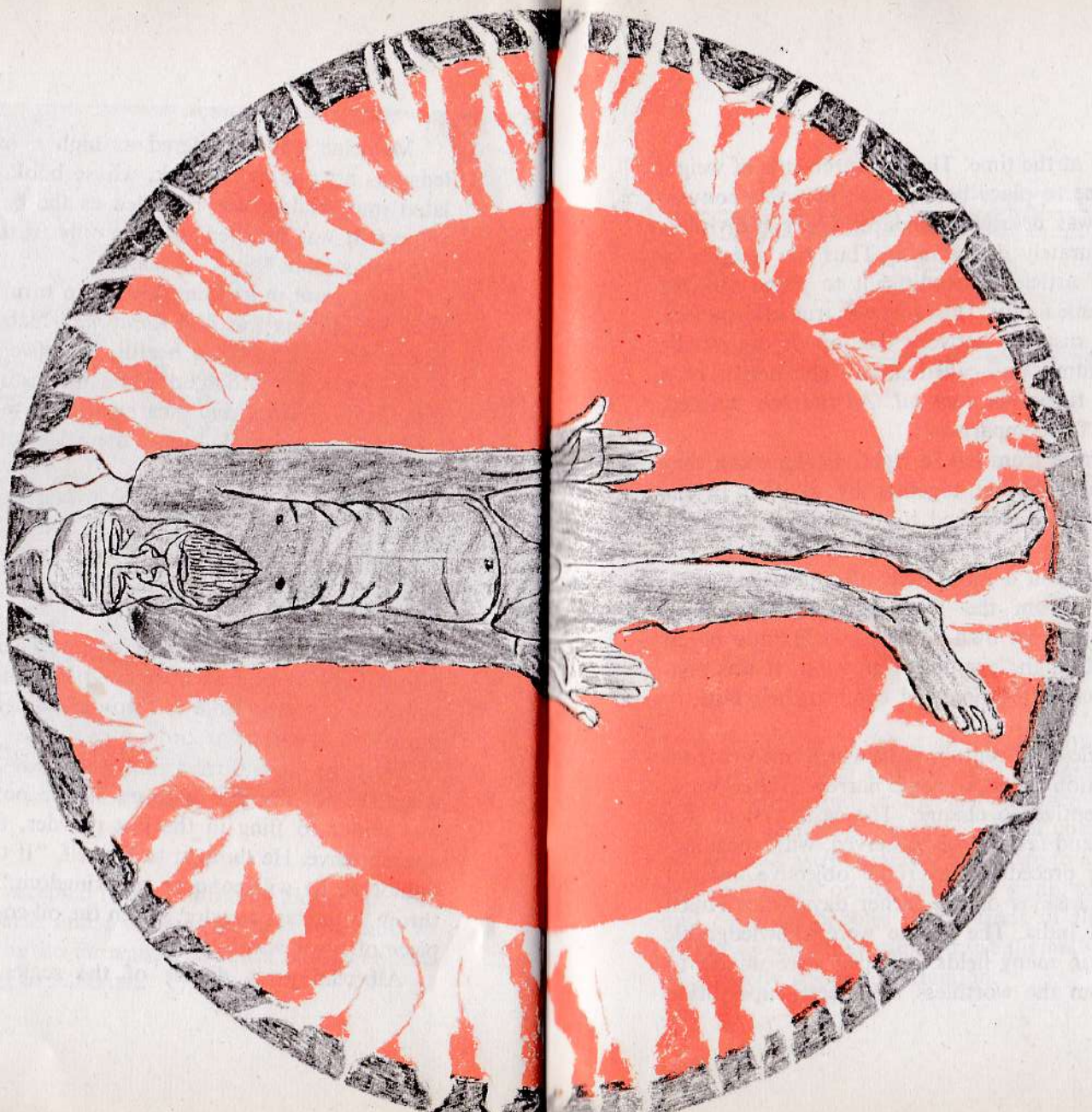
Apart from practising alchemy to turn base metals into gold, the Hindus practised *Rasayana* which was supposed to restore the sick to good health, and give the aged youth.

Alberuni has recorded some interesting stories about the effect of *Rasayana* treatment. He relates the legend behind a long piece of silver in the palace of Raja Bhojadeva of Malwa at Dhar.

One day, a man came to a raja of Malwa with a *Rasayana* prescription and boasted that he had the secret of immortality. If the Raja jumped into a tub of boiling oil and special powders were added at specific intervals, then the Raja would become immortal. But the Raja was afraid and refused to jump into the boiling oil. Thereupon, to prove his case, the man himself jumped into the oil after giving instructions to the Raja to throw the different powders into the oil in a particular order.

First the man turned into pulp, but soon took shape when the Raja began to throw in the powders. Just as he was about to fling in the last powder, the Raja became apprehensive. He thought to himself, "If this man becomes immortal, he will conquer my kingdom." So he did not throw in the last powder. When the oil cooled, only a solid piece of silver was found.

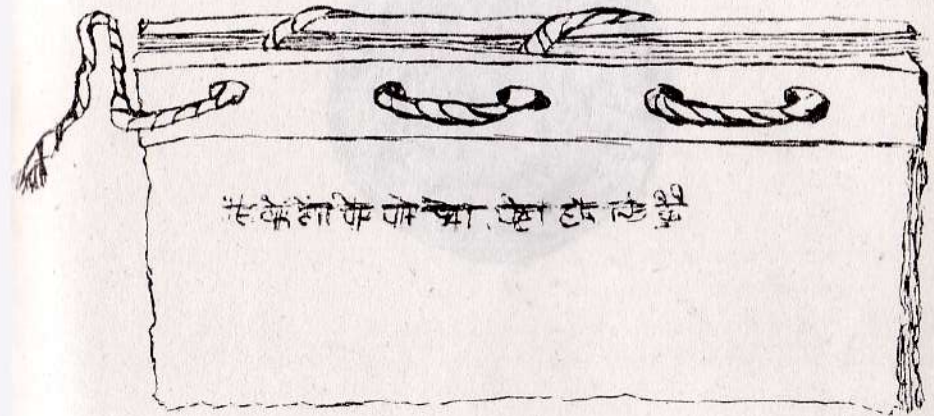
Alberuni gives details of the scales of measurement



prevalent in India at the time. The measurements of weight differed from place to place because the unit was conventional and there was no rigid standard. The sub-divisions could not be accurately determined. Thus the weights of different kinds of articles were difficult to judge and the measurement became faulty. The same was true of distances. For instance, the distance between the top of the middle finger and the thumb was called a *tal*. The height of a person was eight times his own *tal*. As the *tals* differed, there was no unit for comparison.

The Hindus wrote from left to right. In the south they wrote on *tari* leaves bound together by a cord. In the north, people oiled and polished the bark of the *tuz* tree and wrote on it after it became hard and smooth. The leaves were wrapped in a piece of cloth and called *pothi* or *pustika*. Apart from the Devanagari alphabet, each important region had its own script. The Hindus began their books with Om, the symbol of creation. It was supposed to bring them a blessing and confirm their faith in the unity of God.

The picture of eleventh-century India which emerges from Alberuni's description shows a people narrow in their ways, insular and unreceptive to change. The caste system was firmly entrenched and fastidiously observed, with meaningless rituals taking precedence over the objective analysis and the open discussions of the earlier days when Hiuen Tsang had visited India. The people were knowledgeable and far advanced in many fields but they were unable to sift the useful from the worthless and mere superstition



from valid fact. In Alberuni's picturesque language:

"They are in a state of utter confusion, devoid of any logical order, and in the last instance always mixed up with silly notions of the crowd. I can compare their mathematical and astronomical knowledge to a mixture of pearls and sour dates, or of pearls and dung, or of costly crystals and common pebbles. Both kinds of things are equal in their eyes since they cannot raise themselves to the methods of a strictly scientific deduction."



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